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Walker Evans
Photographs

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Photographs

An exhibition circulated under the auspices of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Museum of Modern Art, Oxford
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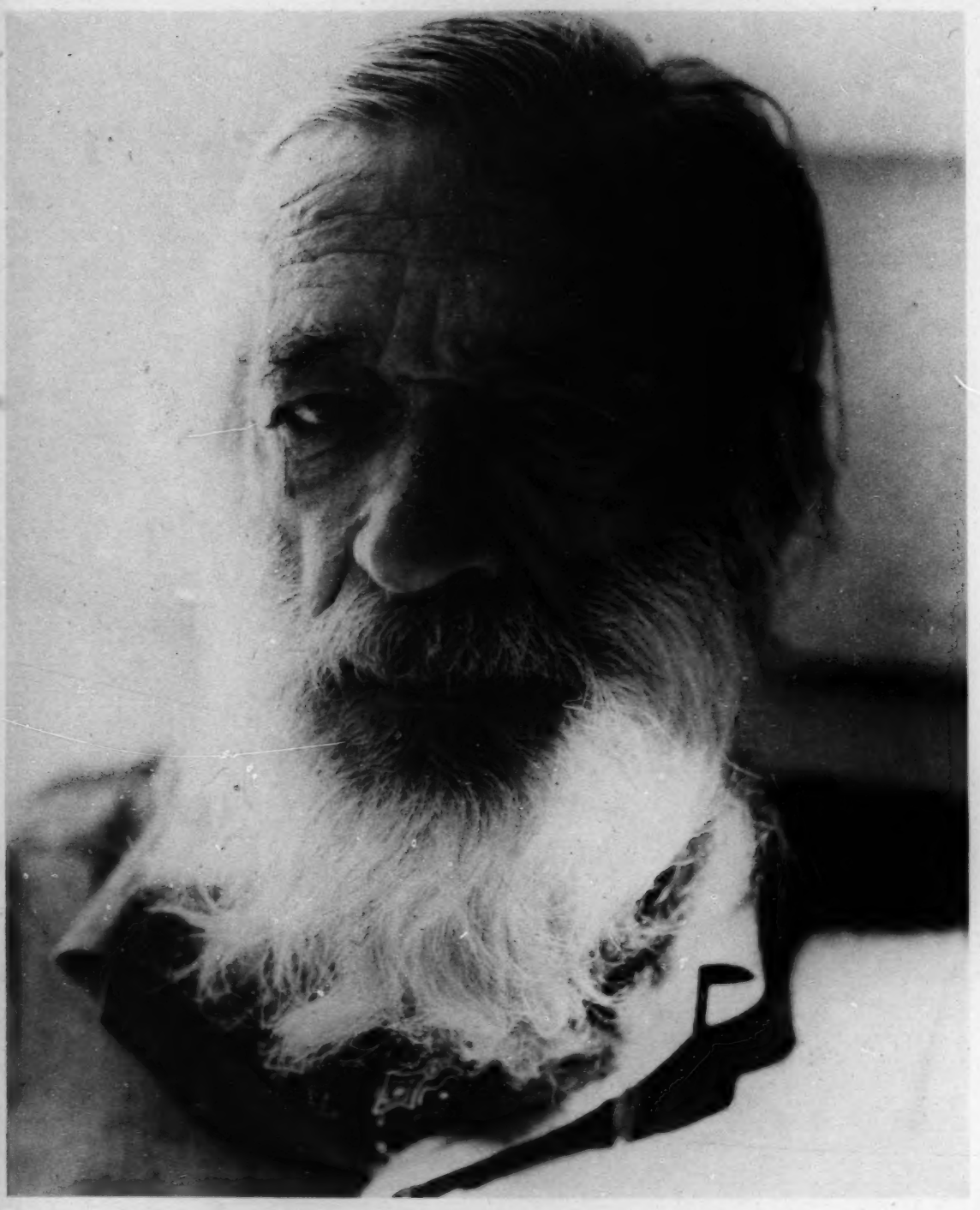
Arts Council of Great Britain 1976



Walker Evans, aged 70, a photograph by Jerry Thompson

Walker Evans, 'one of the greatest artists of his generation' (*New York Times*), began his career as a writer. He was essentially American, and he thought of himself as a recorder of American life in the tradition of Whitman, Melville, Emerson and Thoreau, yet it was by accident that he decided to take up photography, possibly to reject the 'literary' approach of his peers.

He wrote of his Farm Security Administration photographs, 'They were not part of the social protest of the time, or intended to be heart-wringing; they were a record of what's what. You can't do anything about poverty that way, that's too naive'.

These photographs form the major part of the eighty prints selected by John Szarkowski, the Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for this exhibition. Evans' reputation for recording 'what's what' has grown since the FSA days, and with it our sense of debt to his honesty and the tough minded precision with which he approached his subjects.

'Evans' pictures do not solicit attention. They are rigorously unhurried – as he always was, deliberate, deeply human and ultimately serious. His contribution to photography goes far beyond the documentary, purifying the language itself'. *Valerie Lloyd – British journal of Photography*

The International Council of the Museum of Modern Art 1975-1976

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Introduction

Walker Evans' photographs are perhaps difficult to approach from an English viewpoint. For, in spite of their undoubtedly seminal importance in the history of photography, Evans' pictures are outside the tradition of European pictorialism; they do not find their content or their structure from within the acknowledged development of the history of 20th century photography itself. As he said: 'he leaned towards the enchantment of the aesthetically rejected subject'. And, considering the number of years he was acknowledged quietly in America as one of their greatest living photographers, there is surprisingly little documentation about how or why he did anything, or even when. Even the few friends who have interviewed him found him 'elusive and usually taciturn: you have to propound a riddle which interests him. But when he does answer, his statement like one of his photographs, has authority, is literate and tends to transcend the subject'.

Evans was born in an upper-middle class suburb of Chicago, the son of an advertising executive, and moved to New York in his teens. He was educated at Andover and Williams, where he read American, French and English literature avidly for a year and then left. In 1925 he went to Paris, where he took a job of some kind in the library at the Sorbonne, and continued to read and undoubtedly to write. He was a shy young man, and although not yet interested in photography, one has the feeling that he did a lot of watching as well as reading. Although we know little about his life at this time, except that he was continually frustrated by his attempts to write, feeling 'blocked' by the high standards of the writers he admired most, it is clear that the basic tenets of his life were founded then; much later he was to say 'I wasn't very conscious of it then, but I know that Flaubert's aesthetic is absolutely mine. Flaubert's method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyway used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I wanted to use a camera and still do . . . .'

When he returned to America, in 1927, he found himself very much out of mood with the commercialism of the country. Rebelling against the 'Victorian English standards of behaviour' he had been brought up with, he decided to be an

artist, and took a job on Wall Street so that he could be free in the day. He had obtained a vest pocket camera on his return, and still feeling dissatisfied with his attempts to write, he started in 1928–9 to take photographs that excited him enormously: 'I had a few prescient flashes and they led me on ....' Photography, outside the accepted gallery circuit at that time, was still a rather despised medium and Evans began to take some delight in being in a very difficult, disdained medium. It was at that time that he began to form the 'small personal audience' that he believed every artist works for. He shared a flat with Paul Grotz and Hans Skölle, a German painter; he became friends with Hart Crane, the first to 'rave' about his photography, who used two of Evans' pictures to illustrate The Bridge in 1929. He lost his night job in the Wall Street crash and lived in severe poverty for some years, on the rare commissions which came his way through friends: he got to know Lincoln Kirstein, James Agee and Ben Shahn. He describes Kirstein 'invading his life, teaching him about his work with much spirit, flash and dash, and penetrating intelligence about and articulation of all aesthetic matters and their contemporary application'. Agee was another matter altogether, he didn't teach, he perceived and that Evans found stimulating, testing his work through it and finding it strengthened: 'My work just happened to be the style and matter for his eye'. This was the beginning of the extraordinary relationship which was to form between these two men; founded on the most timely symbiosis of work and personality, each of them having qualities and abilities most admired by the other, combined with a similarly extreme moral and aesthetic basis from which to work.

In 1931 Evans wrote a book review for *Hound and Horn,* which is blazingly sharp, leaves nothing sacrosanct and affirms his ability to be penetrating with words. It opens '. . . The real significance of photography was submerged soon after its discovery. The event was simply the linking of an already extant camera with development and fixation of an image. Such a stroke of practical invention was an indirect hit which in application was bound to become tied up in the peculiar dishonesty of vision of its period'. It also helps to clarify his own thoughts about one of the few photographers he admired all his life. Of Atget he says: 'he lived through a period of utter decadence in photography. Apparently he was oblivious to all but the necessity of photographing Paris and its environs, but just what vision he carried inside him of the monument he was leaving is not clear . . . in general the note is lyrical understanding of the street, trained observation of the feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail, over all of which is thrown a poetry which is not "the poetry of the street" or the "poetry of Paris" but the projection of Atget's person'.

We have no reason to suppose that Evans saw Atget's work until some time in 1930, when it was shown in New York, and Evans clearly regarded him as 'someone who stood away from the confusion', oblivious to all that Evans thought bad about that period. However, it is important to stress their differences for Evans had by then become clear intuitively about his own intentions

and had already taken photographs which were important, in a formal sense, such as *Road Side Gas Sign,* 1929, the earlier torn movie posters and many of the street scenes and portraits. Under the influence of Kirstein he had started to document the Victorian houses in Brooklyn and elsewhere, and appears to have made the decision then to use a large format camera and make contact prints, at a time when most photographers were changing over the other way. There is a discernable quality which creeps into Evans' work of this period of a greater regard for history, a conscious recording of things about to disappear, rather than capturing aspects of street life or something which struck his eye of that moment (this feeling comes back strongly into his later work for *Fortune* magazine).

Kirstein, and the Victorian architectural project, were paramount influences encouraging him to make rigorous, clear analyses of the pivotal role played by such buildings in the urbanisation of America at that extraordinary time in its history, and having no hint of the sentimental. All that was best of colonial America and its descendants, the wooden slatted houses, the Regency doorways, the Georgian frontages was giving way to a different kind of proportion. The Ford motor cars, the sidewalks, the billboards, the spread of commercialism was changing America fast. The new culture was aware only of immediate needs and disregarded the latter-day style and the artifice.

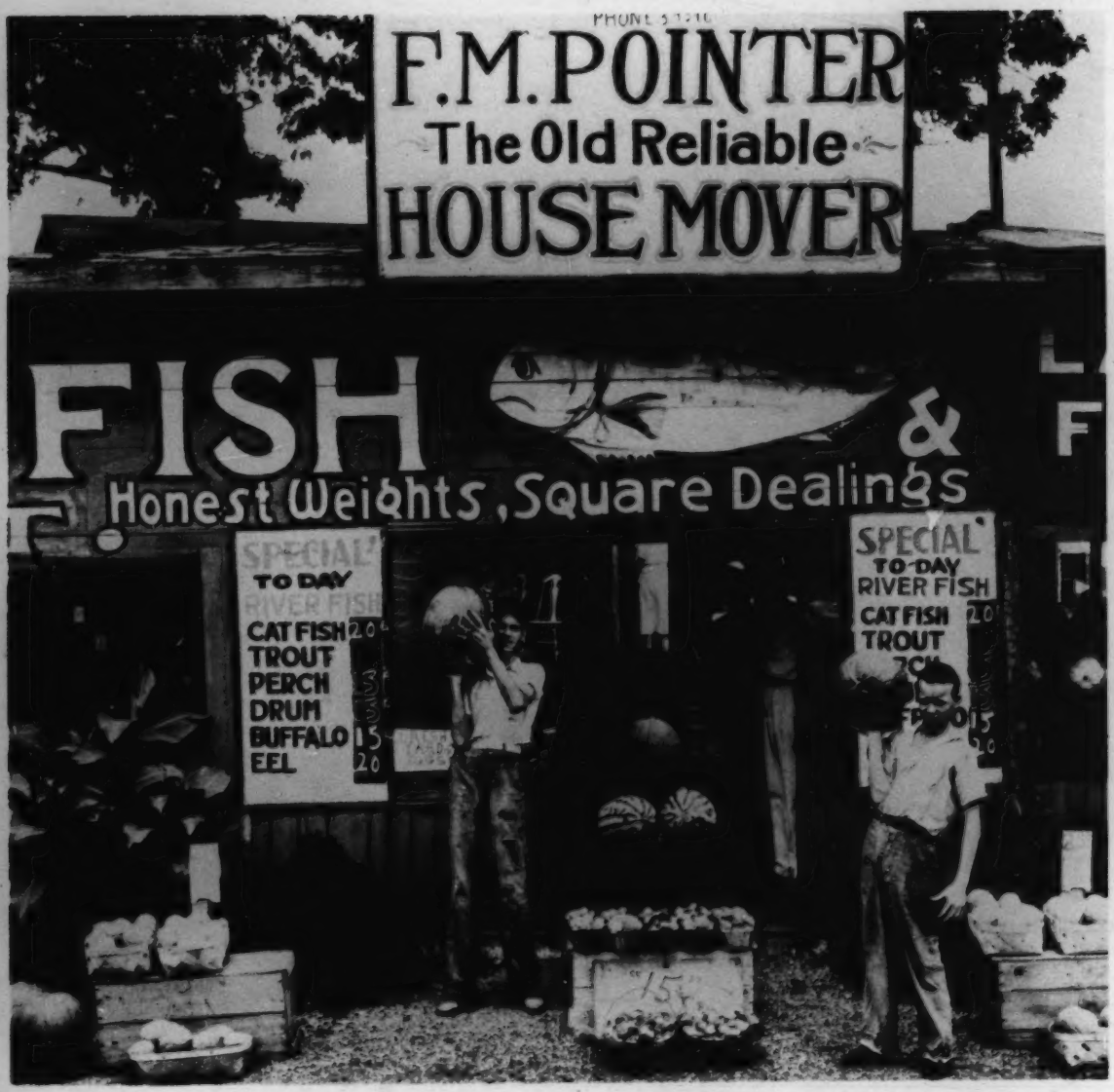
Evans, his education literary, his thinking logical, had returned to America without visual prejudice. He saw it clearly, not only in terms of his visual style, which was according to John Szarkowski 'evolving on two seemingly contradictory tenets, an uncompromising acceptance of precise and literal photographic description and the other a faith in the validity of his own intuitions' but also very precisely in terms of what made it distinctly American. As Alan Trachtenberg has said: 'his pictures belong to the same world that stands revealed in them. They are elegant acts against the deformations his editorial eye picked out in American life. In their grace won by precision, they are at one with the gestures toward beauty, toward transcendent and nourishing style he discovered in the most common-place shacks and streets and hand-painted signs that forever will constitute our vision of certain places at certain times'. His pictures for the Farm Security Administration, which form a good part of this exhibition, and much of his best known work, serve not only to portray an enormous tragedy brought about by the values he abhorred, but also that in these poorest places was to be found much of what was best and most fundamental to American life; a dignity and a beauty which did not depend on false values engendered by a sick and corrupt establishment. Not consciously, but slowly and deliberately, most of all during the months he spent away from the FSA on the assignment for *Fortune,* with James Agee (which led to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), he allowed these people the time, only too aware that it could never be enough, to reveal themselves to his camera with dignity and steadiness of gaze, ready to be seen. In their empty shacks,

shown as they lived their daily lives, the mantels, the dressers, the rooms reveal a kind of sparse orderliness, a kind of beauty created from what they had, lacking everything which a magazine like *Fortune* would have paraded as desirable: they achieved a sense of human value and authority which Evans revealed to us. Values which are too profound to be propaganda, or mere documentation. There is not a consciously contrived, arranged or foreseen idea, in the sense that, once so, an idea formulated literally in the mind before being transformed into an image cannot have anything but a quality reflecting predictably the ego of its author. The instants he captured 'quietly with a flash of the mind and with a machine' corresponded with something much greater in his sense of aesthetic and moral values than mere picture making. He did not intend his pictures to be used as political statements; he saw them from the beginning as art, and with regard to art he would probably agree with Agee addressing the Woods, the Ricketts and Gudgers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men:* 'If I were going to use these lives of yours for "Art", if I were going to dab at them here, cut them short here, make some trifling improvement over here, in order to make you worthy of the Saturday Review of Literature, I would just now for instance be very careful of Anticlimax, which, you must understand, is just not quite nice. It happens in life of course, over and over again, in fact there is no such thing as lack of it, but Art, as all of you would understand if you had my advantages has nothing to do with Life, or no more to do with it than is thoroughly convenient at a given time, a sort of fairweather friendship, or gentleman's agreement, or practical idealism, well understood by both parties and by all readers. However, this is just one of several reasons why I don't care for Art'.

This sense of anticlimax has much to do with the nature of Evans' pictures. James Thrall Soby, a student of Evans in the early '30s, gets near to it when he points out that although he got to know in general terms what kind of subject matter would interest Evans, 'I never knew and don't to this day – what made him decide what to encompass in the screen of his camera, from what distance, with what exploitation of daylight and of the imponderables of plastic balance. These were problems he resolved with hypnotic certainty. The result was an imagery unmistakably his own', or as Trachtenberg again remarked, 'His mode was stillness, he worked in space revealed by light, and found the uncanny distance which allowed the world to bespeak itself under his unmistakeable signature, and, like Whitman, he disdained to theorise, to condescend and 'judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a helpless thing'.

Valerie Lloyd

Sharecropper (Floyd Burroughs), Hale County, Alabama, 1936



Roadside stand near Birmingham, 1936

Barber Shop, Southern Town, 1936

The Breakfast Room at Belle Grove Plantation, White Chapel, Louisiana, March 1935

Cottage at Ossining Camp Woods, New York, 1930

Guthrie, Kentucky, New Year's Day, 1970

Catalogue

*All works are from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, except those marked * which are loaned from the Walker Evans estate.*

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54	Hale County, Alabama	1936
55	Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama	1936
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